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## **Assessing Leader's Character**

### **Character and Leadership: A Theoretical Integration of Two Emerging Concepts. Implications for Research and Teaching**

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> This report results from a grant tasking Swiss Military Academy at ETH Zurich as follows: What are the key considerations in developing a program to assess and build leaders of character? The goal of this research was to answer this question by analyzing the relationship between the two emerging concepts of 'character' and 'leadership' and derive implications for further research and teaching in leadership development programs. As a result, we can now conclude: (1) Character is a holistic, multi-faceted psychological construct. (2) Character focuses on cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. (3) Character manifests in morally challenging situations. (4) Character includes many moral and non-moral sub-constructs. (4) There are a large number of instruments to measure these cognitive, affective and behavioral moral and non-moral sub-constructs. (5) Functional and hierarchical requirements should be considered with regard to a decision of important character sub-constructs. (6) Selection or development purposes may require to focus on different character sub-constructs and evaluation methods; there is a mutual interaction between functional/hierarchical levels and selection and development purposes, and (7) Results of all character assessments should be interpreted with the necessary caution as the interrelation between the many sub-constructs is not well understood yet.						
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# ASSESSING LEADERS' CHARACTER<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. What is character?

Before we can discuss how to assess character, we need to define what character is. This leads to a major challenge in the discussion around character assessment: There is no commonly agreed definition of character. Various, partially competing definitions are used to describe this complex, holistic construct. Cashman (1991) states that character is necessary to use our own knowledge and skills effectively. Hence, having character is a necessary precondition to act in an adequate way in a certain situation.

For Berkowitz and Bier (2004), character is a complex, multifaceted, and psychological construct that comprises the moral side of a person. For them, character relates to moral functioning. Berkowitz (1997) identified seven psychological aspects of character: moral action, moral values, moral personality, moral emotions, moral reasoning, moral identity, and foundational characteristics. In summary, character includes all moral aspects of a person besides their habits, attitudes, and dispositions.

For Lickona (1991, 1993) a person with character will be doing the right thing despite outside pressure to do the contrary. Consequently, a person's character can be identified through observing and evaluating his or her behavior in critical situations. However, Lickona does not only emphasize on the importance of moral actions, but also on moral knowledge and moral feelings. Only if we have an understanding of what is morally right and wrong, if we can identify and analyze moral conflicts appropriately and identify and control our emotions and feelings in challenging situations, we will be able to show the right behavior. Based on Lickona's understanding of character, we need to focus on moral feelings (be), moral knowledge (know), and moral behavior (do) when assessing leaders' character. As such, a person of character has a profound understanding of who he or she is, is convinced

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about the importance of the moral dimension of decision making and behavior, has the necessary knowledge and skills to analyze moral implications (such as moral reasoning, understanding of values, etc.) and is motivated and able to act accordingly. The importance of the interrelation between the cognitive, affective, and behavioral side of character is underlined by Narvaez and Lapsley (2009) when they state that somebody has character to the extent that moral schemas are chronically accessible for social information processing and by Jackson, Douglas and Coyne (2010) when they state that character has frequently been seen as a habitual behavior. These two statements underline the interdependency between moral feelings, moral knowledge, and moral action.

However, not only moral aspects play an important role when it comes to the ability of a person to make the right decision and show the right behavior in morally challenging situations. General problem-solving skills, self-control, commitment, or self-efficacy beliefs (nonexhaustive enumeration) are other important competencies to analyze challenging situations appropriately and behave accordingly. Lickona and Davidson (2005) presented a model with “8 Strengths of Character”, including moral and non-moral aspects. They underlined the importance of a) critical thinking, b) diligence, c) social-emotional skills, d) ethical thinking, e) commitment to moral action, f) self-discipline, g) community involvement, and h) pursuing a life with noble purpose in the context of moral decision making and behavior.

## **2. How to measure character?**

The above reflections illustrate that the term ‘character’ refers to a holistic construct that focuses on knowledge, emotions, and behavior in morally challenging situations. Although there is no single and commonly agreed definition of character, different descriptions show a great overlap in specific sub-components. In order to show the right behavior in moral conflicts, moral constructs (such as moral awareness, moral reasoning, moral identity, etc.) as well as non-moral constructs related to perception, problem-solving, and behavior (such as analytical skills, self-control, self-efficacy beliefs, drive, commitment, etc.) play an important role.

The holistic nature of ‘character’ and the numerous sub-constructs that might be potential components influencing moral (or immoral) behavior cause a major problem in assessing an individual’s character: It is nearly impossible to measure all relevant constructs and their interrelations at the same time. Therefore, it is understandable why Roth-Herbst,

Borbely, and Brooks-Gunn (2007) concluded that there is “little work... that attempted to create a reliable and valid scale to measure the many components implied by the term character” (p. 175).

A more realistic (pragmatic) approach to assess character is to define a manageable number of important sub-constructs and to measure them with existing and validated instruments. In the following, we provide a list of some instruments measuring one or a group of sub-constructs of character.

### **Ethical/Moral Sensitivity or Awareness**

- Moral (Ethical) Sensitivity or Awareness has proven to be a necessary precondition to moral judgment and decisions. For an overview about different moral sensitivity measures we recommend:
  - Jordan, J. (2007). Taking the first step toward a moral action: A review of moral sensitivity measurement across domains. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 168*(3), 323-359.
- Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire (MSQ): The MSQ is an example out of health care practice. There's no moral sensitivity questionnaire for the military domain.
  - Lütznén, K., Dahlqvist, V., Eriksson, S., & Norberg, A. (2006). Developing the concept of moral sensitivity in health care practice. *Nursing Ethics, 13*(2), 187-196.

### **Moral reasoning**

- Defining Issues Test (DIT):
  - Rest, J., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M., & Thoma, S. (1999). DIT-2: Devising and testing a new instrument of moral judgment. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(4), 644–659.
  - Rest, J., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M., & Thoma, S. (1999). A Neo-Kohlbergian Approach: The DIT and Schema Theory. *Educational Psychology Review 11*(4), 291–324.
- Moral Judgment Test (MJT):

- Lind, G. (1999). An introduction to the Moral Judgment Test (MJT). Paper available at [http://www.uni-konstanz.de/FuF/SozWiss/fg-psy/ag-moral/pdf/Lind-1999\\_MJT-Introduction-E.pdf](http://www.uni-konstanz.de/FuF/SozWiss/fg-psy/ag-moral/pdf/Lind-1999_MJT-Introduction-E.pdf)

## **Moral intuitions**

- Moral Sense Test (MST):
  - Information about the test and the research staff at <http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu/index2.html>

## **Moral emotions**

- The role of moral emotions was widely discussed. For an overview see:
  - Haidt, J. (2003). The moral emotions. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 852-870). Oxford : Oxford University Press.
  - Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 345-372.
- Empathy:
  - Quick Empathy Scale (QSE):
    - Caruso, D. & Mayer, J.D. (1999). *A measure of empathy for adolescents and adults*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Guilt / Shame:
  - Guilt and Shame Proneness (GASP):
    - Cohen, T. R., Wolf, S. T., Panter, A. T., & Chester, A. I. (2011). Introducing the GASP scale: A new measure of guilt and shame proneness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- Anger:
  - A possibility to measure moral anger:

- Russell, P. S., & Giner-Sorolla, R. (2010). Moral anger is more flexible than moral disgust. *Social Psychological & Personality Science*, 2(4), 360-364.
- Elevation:
  - To measure elevation as a personality trait, you can use the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS):
    - Diessner, R., Parsons, L., Solom, R., Frost, N., & Davidson, J. (in press). Engagement with beauty scale: Validation of measures of natural, artistic and moral beauty. *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*.
  - Elevation and Leadership:
    - Vianello, M., Galliani, E. M., & Haidt, J. (2010). Elevation at work: The organizational effects of leaders' moral excellence. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5, 390-411.
  - Moral Identity and Moral Elevation / Measure example:
    - Aquino, K., McFerran, B., & Laven, M. (2011). Moral identity and the experience of moral elevation in response to acts of uncommon goodness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(4), 703-718.
- Disgust:
  - Disgust Scale (DS-R):
    - Haidt, J., McCauley, C., & Rozin, P. (1994). Individual differences in sensitivity to disgust: A scale sampling seven domains of disgust elicitors. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 16, 701-713.
    - Modified by: Olatunji, B. O., Williams, N. L., Tolin, D. F., Sawchuck, C. N., Abramowitz, J. S., Lohr, J. M., et al. (2007). The disgust scale: Item analysis, factor structure, and suggestions for refinement. *Psychological Assessment*. 19, 281-297.

## **Moral Potency**

- Consists of sub-domains: moral ownership / moral efficacy / moral courage, 12-item-questionnaire, [www.mindgarden.com](http://www.mindgarden.com)
  - o Hannah, S. T., & Avolio, B. J. (2010). Moral Potency: Building the capacity for character-based leadership.

### **Moral Motivation**

- Moral Motivation (MoMo) Rating Scale:
  - o Nunner-Winkler, G., Meyer-Nikele, M., & Wohlrab, D. (2007). Gender differences in moral motivation. *Merill-Palmer Quarterly*, 53(1), 26-52.

### **Ethical/Moral Decision-making**

- Moral decision-making in the military:
  - o Seiler, S., Fischer, A., & Ooi, Y. P (2010). An interactional dual-process model of moral decision making to guide military training. *Military Psychology*, 22(4), 490-509.
  - o Seiler, S., Fischer, A., & Voegtli, S. (in press). Developing moral decision-making competence: A quasi-experimental intervention study in the Swiss Armed Forces. *Ethics & Behavior*.

### **Values / Virtues / Identity / Character**

- Character Assessment Rating Scale (CARS):
  - o Barlow, C. B., Jordan, M., & Hendrix, W. H. (2003). Character assessment: An examination of leadership levels. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 17(4), 563-584.
- Behavior Desirability Scale (BDS):
  - o Hendrix, W. H. (2001). *Behavioral and value-based character assessment system development and validation*. Paper presented at 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Association for Moral Education Meeting, Vancouver, Canada.
- Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ):



- Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 1029-1046.
- Moral Identity Scale:
  - Aquino, K., & Reed, A. (2002). The self importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 1423-1440.
- Ethics Positions Questionnaire (EPQ):
  - Forsyth, D. (1980). A taxonomy of ethical ideologies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 175-184.

### **Climate / Environment**

- It could be hypothesized that leaders with character have a positive influence on their team's climate and the whole working environment.
- Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ):
  - Cullen, J. B., & Victor, B. (1993). The Ethical Climate Questionnaire: An assessment of its development and validity. *Psychological Reports*, 73, 667-674.
  - The RECQ is a modified version of the ECQ: Webber, S. (2007). Ethical climate typology and questionnaire: A discussion of instrument modifications. Available online [www.sherivtross.com](http://www.sherivtross.com)
- Military Environment Inventory (MEI; Rudolf H. Moos):
  - “As one of the Social Climate Scales, the primary uses of the MEI include: describing military units; comparing the perceptions of officers, NCOs, and enlisted members; monitoring changes over time; contrasting different units; and performing other evaluations. It measures involvement, peer cohesion, officer support, personal status, order and organization, clarity, and officer control.” [www.mindgarden.com/products/meins.htm](http://www.mindgarden.com/products/meins.htm)

## **Leadership styles**

- To be a transformational, authentic or servant leader it needs a lot of character associated traits, abilities or behaviors.

- Transformational Leadership:

- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1990). *Transformational Leadership Development. Manual for the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychology Press.
- Alimo-Metcalfe, B., & Alban-Metcalfe, R. J. (2001). The development of a new Transformational Leadership Questionnaire. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 74, 1-27.

- Authentic Leadership

- Sosik, J. J., & Cameron, J. C. (2010). Character and authentic transformational leadership behavior: Expanding the ascetic self toward others. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62(4), 251-269.
- Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, 34(1), 89-126.

- Servant Leadership

- Sendjaya, S., Sarros, J. C., & Santora, C. (2008). Defining and measuring servant leadership behavior in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(2), 402-424.
- Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Zhao, H., & Henderson, D. (2008). Servant Leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(2), 161-177

## **Self-related non moral factors**

- Locus of Control: External Locus of Control is positively correlated with unethical behavior.

- Marsh, H. W. & Richards, G. E. (1986). The Rotter Locus of Control Scale: The comparison of alternative response formats and implications for reliability, validity and dimensionality. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 20, 509-558.
- Marsh, H. W. & Richards, G. E. (1987). The multidimensionality of the Rotter I-E Scale and its higher order structure: An application of confirmatory factor analysis. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 22, 39-69.
- Rotter, J. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcements, *Psychological Monographs*, 80, Whole No. 609.
- Coping
  - Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., & Weintraub, J. K. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 267-283.
  - Carver, C. S. (1997). You want to measure coping but your protocol's too long: Consider the Brief COPE. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 4(1), 92-100.
- Self-Control: For an overview see:
  - Mezo, P. G., & Heiby, E. M. (2004). A comparison of four measures of self-control skills. *Assessment*, 11(3), 238-250.

### **3. What should be measured? It is not that easy...**

This list illustrates the large number of instruments measuring some important aspects of character. Which are now the most important constructs and which are the best instruments? Four problems are related to a clear answer to this question:

First, all constructs are part of a holistic understanding of character and therefore, it is difficult to prioritize some of them.

Second, the interrelations and interdependencies between these constructs are not well understood; this leads to problems with regard to an adequate interpretation of assessment results (e.g., are low scores of a person in a moral awareness questionnaire the result of a perception problem or a momentary or general motivation problem?).

Third, different functional and hierarchical positions may lead to different moral challenges and therefore, require different skills and competencies in solving problems,

making decisions, controlling emotions, and behaving appropriately. Of course, one can argue that no matter in which function or at which level a person is, character always manifests in the same way – by doing the right thing despite outside pressure to do the contrary. However, when it comes to the question of assessing character, it is important to identify major moral challenges for a particular function or hierarchical level and identify the respective character sub-constructs and measurement instruments or methods to assess a person's level of competence in these domains. It is, for instance, possible that for some functions the management of moral emotions such as anger or disgust is more important, while for others complex moral decision making competencies and the ability to create an ethical climate are more important. As such, an analysis of major moral challenges requiring strong character in a particular function or hierarchical level can help to identify the most important sub-constructs for each function and level.

A fourth consideration is related to the purpose of the assessment. Leaders' character can be assessed in the context of selection and/or development. In the context of selection the focus should be on critical "must have" constructs and minimal standards should be defined. In the context of development the focus should be on current or future functional and/or hierarchical requirements. In addition, the focus should be on developmental changes in the relevant sub-constructs (Seiler, Fischer, & Voegtli, 2011) rather than on results of stigmatizing one-time measures. If the goal of developmental activities is to prepare position holders for more complex functions, the post-development results can be used as a selection criteria for the next level. This underlines the mutual interaction between functional/hierarchical level and selection and development purpose of certain character sub-constructs.

#### **4. Conclusion**

- Character is a holistic, multi-faceted psychological construct.
- Character focuses on cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects.
- Character manifests in morally challenging situations.
- Character includes many moral and non-moral sub-constructs.
- There are a large number of instruments to measure these cognitive, affective and behavioral moral and non-moral sub-constructs.
- Functional and hierarchical requirements should be considered with regard to a decision of important character sub-constructs.

- Selection or development purposes may require to focus on different character sub-constructs and evaluation methods; there is a mutual interaction between functional/hierarchical levels and selection and development purposes.
- Results of all character assessments should be interpreted with the necessary caution as the interrelation between the many sub-constructs is not well understood yet.

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